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ABSTRACT

When created and operated appropriately, school-site councils can be a very useful component of school renewal. Councils are difficult to create, since members must shift roles, compromise strongly held beliefs, and invest considerable time, energy, and know-how. Advantages of group decision making are bringing diverse experience and expertise to a problem, facilitating implementation, and stressing the representative whole over single strident or persistent voices. To ensure effectiveness, school councils must focus on important issues and use time wisely. Principals must learn to share authority, or traditional power relationships will merely be furthered. Principals who exercise power through, rather than over, others create conditions favoring staff cooperation to achieve valued outcomes. Effective site councils begin with adequate training and are characterized by diversity, open communications, and accountability to the school board and the superintendent. Districts should develop policies specifying the relationship between the district and site councils, the councils' place in the strategic district plan, and permissible exemptions from policy and procedures. School-site councils are grassroots, reform-oriented organizations whose effectiveness depends on people's skilful and committed participation in the democratic process. (MLH)

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School-Site Councils

by David Peterson - del Mar

School-site councils are part of a broader movement of school reform and renewal, particularly toward shared decision-making. At their best, they are a broadly representative group of people who skillfully blend diverse experiences and viewpoints into wise decisions that are effectively carried out.

Site councils are easy to mandate, much more difficult to create. They require their members to leave behind accustomed roles and compromise strongly held beliefs. They consume a great deal of time and energy. They require both good intentions and skillful execution.

Although school-site councils decentralize authority on a grassroots level, their authority does not typically impinge on the authority of the district office or school board.

What Are the Possibilities of School-Site Councils?

Site councils, if created and operated appropriately, can be a very useful component of school renewal and reform. Increasing the pool of decision-makers can make both for better decisions and for better implementation of those decisions.

The most obvious advantage of group decision-making is that it brings the experience and expertise of many people to bear on a problem. This can be especially useful for a complex institution such as a school, where no single administrator is likely to have the knowledge or skills to make consistently effective decisions. Seven heads, or ten, are usually better than one.

The very process of skillful group decision-making facilitates implementing those decisions. Jeffrey W. Eiseman and his colleagues (1989) note that "school improvement teams. . . greatly enhance the flow of accurate information regarding implementation within the school" and reduce "detrimental rumors." Moreover, people are more likely to act on decisions that they had a hand in making.

By integrating the community into the decision-making process, site councils undercut the influence of a single strident and persistent voice and give weight to the more subdued and representative whole.

These well-known benefits of group decision-making will be largely wasted, however, if the site council does not focus on important issues. Will the council decide which rooms get carpets and how lunch duty is assigned, or will its central mission be to spearhead renewal of the instructional program? As David T. Conley (1993) writes, "When educators consider strategies for increasing stakeholder participation in decision-making, they might benefit by asking one question first: Why are we doing this?"

What Are Some Common Difficulties of Site Councils?

As discussed above, site councils have considerable potential for improving the decisions that a school makes and its implementation of those decisions. But there are many potential pitfalls in this process.

In the first place, an effective school-site council requires its members to assume new roles. Principals, for example, must learn to share authority. Teachers, in particular, may hesitate to challenge or disagree with the building supervisor. Remarked a Salt Lake City teacher/site council member: "Trying to push issues gets one in trouble" (Malen and Ogawa 1985). Teachers on that city's site councils commonly feared "that parents might 'stir up problems that don't really need to be addressed'" (Malen and Ogawa). A parent on a South Carolina site council complained that "sometimes things come up and if there's a bit of argument, it fizzles out" without resolution (Monrad and Norman 1992).

Malen and Ogawa conclude that Salt Lake City site councils, though intended to restructure top-down decision-making, had in fact furthered traditional relations of power within the schools. School-site councils create the possibility of shared decision-making, but they cannot guarantee that principals, other staff, and parents will in fact be able to overcome old habits to do the hard work of sharing authority.

Lack of time can hamstring even school-site councils that are able to break old patterns. A high school assistant principal noted that some staff regard school-site councils primarily "as a whole lot more work" (Peterson - del Mar 1994). Teachers and other staff members find their numbers shrinking and their responsibilities expanding. It is a cruel irony that shared decision-making is gaining momentum at a time when staff find it increasingly difficult to participate in it.

What Are the Characteristics of Effective Councils?

Effective school-site councils begin with effective training. "Not

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very many teachers, parents, or administrators for that matter have been trained in group process," notes Bill Kentta, an administrator with the Eugene (Oregon) School District (Peterson - del Mar). Such training should cover topics like group decision-making, conflict resolution, and building group culture. Without adequate preparation, group members are apt to assume familiar authoritarian or passive roles and to think in individualistic rather than corporate terms.

Effective site councils are also characterized by diversity. Even the most homogeneous school is in fact highly diverse, containing both women and men, children and adults, administrators, teachers, classified staff, parents, and community members. Growing numbers of schools also contain an expanding spectrum of ethnic or racial groups and social classes. Councils that are broadly inclusive bring the strength and experience of each group to the council.

Finally, site councils enhance their effectiveness when they communicate with the broader school community. Parent members can report to parent organizations, teacher members to their departments, and so forth. These liaisons increase people's sense of participation and make for decisions that are more broadly shared.

Site councils should also be sensitive to the fact that they, too, are subject to a larger authority: the school board and the superintendent. Site councils should respect the limits of their power and expect to be held accountable for the results of their decisions.

What Is the Principal's Role?

It is easy to see why some principals would feel threatened by the creation of site councils in their schools. The council's raison d'etre is that decision-making by the principal alone is somehow deficient and in need of supplementation by others: teachers, classified staff members, parents, other community members, even students. Those principals who resist the formation of a council, however, or who attempt to undermine its functioning forfeit an opportunity to exercise a potent style of leadership that can help to transform their schools. Principals who learn to exercise power *through*, rather than *over*, others create conditions in their schools for all personnel to work together to achieve valued outcomes (Conley).

Etheridge and her colleagues (1990) surveyed a number of site councils in Tennessee and concluded that the ideal principal had a democratic style in relating to other council members. Such principals possessed "a well defined view of what needed to be done to improve the school," but they also actively sought input from others, accepted that their point of view would not always prevail, and believed that others could make sound choices.

What Is the Relationship Between Site Councils and Other Decision-Makers?

Districts that do not have a policy or mechanism for spelling out the authority of school-site councils are "asking for trouble," in the words of Kentta (Peterson - del Mar). Such a policy specifies the relationship between the district and the site councils. The board might specify that site councils cannot deviate from a district's strategic plan, for example. It also might specify that site councils can seek exemptions from district policy on a case-by-case basis. Open communication can help to ensure that site councils do not overstep their boundaries and can avoid painful vetoes and consequent hard feelings.

The district's decision-makers and the site councils ideally work together, in concert. Jim Carnes of the Oregon School Boards Association argues for "a district vision and a school version" of it, a coordination that brings "alignment" and "power" (Peterson - del Mar). School-site councils function best when they are part of a larger reform movement within the school and within the district.

School-site councils, at their best, are essentially grassroots democracy. They therefore depend on people's commitment to participate in the democratic process. This means sharing power and responsibility, obtaining the necessary training and education, and then diligently applying it.

The mere presence of a school-site council means very little. Only the committed and skillful participation of the school community can breathe life into its form.

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